



An Instance of the Grotesque from Smollett to Dickens: Roderick (Random), Barnaby (Rudge) and the Raven

Anne Rouhette

► To cite this version:

Anne Rouhette. An Instance of the Grotesque from Smollett to Dickens: Roderick (Random), Barnaby (Rudge) and the Raven. Isabelle Hervouet-Farrar, Max Vega-Ritter. The Grotesque in the Fiction of Charles Dickens and Other 19th-Century Novelists, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.37-50, 2014, 978-1-4438-6756-6. hal-01323766

HAL Id: hal-01323766

<https://hal.uca.fr/hal-01323766>

Submitted on 31 May 2016

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

CHAPTER THREE

AN INSTANCE OF THE GROTESQUE FROM SMOLLETT TO DICKENS: RODERICK (RANDOM), BARNABY (RUDGE) AND THE RAVEN.

ANNE ROUHETTE

Smollett's influence on Dickens has been frequently commented upon,¹ and goes deeper than one might infer from the passing allusions made by David Copperfield, who, echoing the views of his creator, expresses several times his admiration for Smollett and for *Roderick Random* (1748) in particular. Smollett and Dickens shared a common admiration for Hogarth and for his interest in human physiognomy, as well as a common taste (common to Hogarth too of course) for visual satire²—like Smollett, Dickens considered the human face as representative of character and used this for satirical purposes. Smollett's predilection for the grotesque probably explains why his impact on Dickens was weightier than Fielding's; although the latter was another master of satire, his novels do not stray beyond the bounds of caricature to venture into grotesque territory, at least not as much or often as Smollett's do. In fact, Smollett resorts consistently and recurrently to a grotesque mode of writing; grotesque figures abound in his novels and especially his early ones, among which *Roderick Random*. This predilection probably derives in part from his Scottish origins since the Scottish literary tradition repeatedly mingles the ridiculous and the terrible,³ two elements which, as we shall see, play a major role in the grotesque. The following excerpt from *Roderick Random*, which consists in a grotesque description of the loathsome apothecary Crab, may help illustrate Dickens's debt to Smollett:

This member of the faculty was aged fifty, about five feet high, and ten round the belly; his face was as capacious as a full moon, and much of the complexion of a mulberry: his nose, resembling a powder-horn, was swelled to an enormous size, and studded all over with carbuncles; and his little grey eyes reflected the rays in such an oblique manner that, while he looked a person full in the face, one would have imagined he was admiring the buckle of his shoe. (Smollett 2008, 26)

If this depiction begins as a caricature, with exaggerated physical traits, it soon becomes grotesque by way of the comparison with a mulberry then with a powder-horn as the man turns into a fruit then into a threatening object. A disquieting and vaguely sinister element is thus introduced and reinforced by the deformed nose,

¹ The similarities between Smollett and Dickens have been explored most extensively by F. D. Wiestra (see Wiestra 1928).

² Dickens's interest in physiognomy and its link with the grotesque are developed for instance in Hollington 1984, 14.

³ See Notestein 1946, 328, and especially Wittig 1958, 48, 71 and 120.

which is not only excessively big but resolutely “enormous” and “studded all over with carbuncles,” a term whose two meanings, physical and ornamental, interact here humorously largely thanks to the past participle “studded,” as Crab’s monstrous nose is transformed into a work of art. With this distortion, borne out by the “oblique” manner in which he looks at people, his physical deformation clearly corresponds to the moral deformity of a bad apothecary and domestic tyrant who beats his wife and servants and probably killed one of his footmen—his appearance matches his vicious character. In Jerry Beasley’s words, Crab is “a moral grotesque who, as perceived and recreated, becomes a physical grotesque in a convincingly authentic visual representation” (Beasley 1998, 49).

In Smollett’s as in Dickens’s novels, the descriptions of grotesque characters go beyond the exaggeration of features typical of caricature to incorporate elements (animal, vegetal, supernatural, mechanical, etc.) which are alien to human nature, turning these characters into hybrids which both require and elude definition, and blurring the perception of what is supposed to be known in a process of de-familiarisation. As John Ruskin explains in his famous definition of the grotesque:

It seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements; there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest. (Ruskin 2007, 126)

Here Ruskin lays stress on the paradoxical blend of the ridiculous (or comical) and the terrible (or fearful) inherent in the grotesque before examining different types of grotesque according to the “degree” in which either element predominates. It is this question of degree, the essentially terrible shading into the jestful and the jestful into the terrible, that I would now like to consider by way of a specific instance of the grotesque which crops up in both Smollett’s and Dickens’s work. I wish above all to focus on the way this blend of antagonistic principles is perceived, analysing the responses it calls forth both on a diegetic level, in the characters confronted with it, and on the reader’s part. The instance I am referring to is itself a “blend,” so to speak—the strange couple formed by the association of an idiot with a tamed raven. In Dickens, the idiot is the eponymous character of *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), who never goes without Grip, his dancing and talking (and talkative) crow whose favourite utterance is “I’m a devil!” Grip’s author deliberately gifted him with a reason, or with the semblance of a reason, Barnaby himself is deprived of; as Dickens put it to Forster, he wanted to have Barnaby accompanied by “a pet raven who is immeasurably more knowing than himself.”⁴ If Dickens explains in the

⁴ Dickens 1969, 197. Ruskin, who detested *Barnaby Rudge* and all its characters, thought Grip the only redeeming feature of the novel (cited in Bowen 2003, xxvii-xxviii).

preface he added to the novel in 1849 that he modelled Grip on the two tamed ravens he had owned (he would acquire a third one at a later date and commemorated him in an altered version of the preface in 1858),⁵ the association between a raven and an idiot probably sprung from a literary source, indeed, as both F. D. Wiestra and Jerome H. Buckley speculate,⁶ from the following passage in Smollett's *Roderick Random* (as it will be analysed in detail, it is necessary to quote here at length):

We arrived at our inn, supped and went to bed; but Strap's distemper continuing, he was obliged to get up in the middle of the night, and taking the candle in his hand, which he had left burning for the purpose, he went down to the house of office; whence in a short time he returned in a great hurry, with his hair standing on end, and a look betokening horror and astonishment. Without speaking a word, he set down the light and jumped into bed behind me, where he lay and trembled with great violence.—When I asked him what was the matter? he replied, with a broken accent, 'God have mercy on us! I have seen the devil.'—Though my prejudice was not quite so strong as his, I was not a little alarmed at this exclamation, and much more so, when I heard the sound of bells approaching our chamber, and felt my bedfellow cling close to me, uttering these words, 'Christ have mercy upon us! there he comes.'—At that instant, a monstrous overgrown raven entered our chamber, with bells at its feet, and made directly towards our bed.—As this creature is reckoned in our country, a common vehicle for the devil and witches to play their pranks in, I verily believed we were haunted; and in a violent fright, shrunk my head under the bed-cloaths.—This terrible apparition leapt upon the bed, and after giving us several severe dabs with its beak through the blankets, hopped away, and vanished. Strap and I recommended ourselves to the protection of heaven with great devotion, and when we no longer heard the noise, ventured to peep up and take breath. But we had not been long freed from this phantom, when another appeared, that had well nigh deprived us both of our senses. We perceived an old man enter the room, with a long white beard that reached to his middle; there was a certain wild peculiarity in his eyes and countenance, that did not savour of this world: and his dress consisted of a brown stuff coat, buttoned behind, and at the wrists, and an odd-fashioned cap of the same stuff upon his head. I was so amazed that I had not power to move my eyes from such a ghastly object, but lay motionless, and saw him come streight up to me: when he got to the bed, he wrung his hands, and cried, with a voice that did not seem to belong to a human creature, 'Where is Ralph?' I made no reply; upon which, he repeated in an accent still more preternatural; 'Where is Ralpho?'—He had no sooner pronounced these words, than I heard the sound of the bells at a distance; which the apparition having listened to, tript away, and left me almost petrified with fear. It was a good while before I could recover myself so

⁵ His most beloved raven was called "Grip" and died in 1841. There are many references to Dickens's pet ravens in his letters.

⁶ See Wiestra 1928, 74 and Buckley 1992, 30.

far as to speak: and when at length I turned about to Strap, I found him in a fit, which, however, did not last long.—When he came to himself, I asked his opinion of what had happened; and he assured me, that the first must certainly be the soul of some person damned, which appeared by the chains about its legs (for his fears had magnified the creature to the bigness of a horse, and the sound of small morris bells to the clanking of massy chains)—As for the old man, he took it to be the spirit of somebody murdered long ago in this place, which had power granted it to torment the assassin in the shape of a raven, and that Ralpho was the name of the said murderer.—Although I had not much faith in his interpretation, I was too much troubled to enjoy any sleep; and in all my future adventures, never passed a night so ill.—In the morning, Strap imparted the whole affair to Joey, who after an immoderate fit of laughter, explained the matter, by telling him that the old man was the landlord's father, who had turned idiot some years ago, and diverted himself with a tame raven, which, it seems, had hopped away from his apartment in the night, and induced him to follow it to our chamber, where he had inquired after it, under the name of Ralpho. (60-62)

There is an almost pre-Radcliffean Gothic quality to this extract, in the sense that an incident perceived as belonging to the supernatural ultimately receives a rational explanation. A few introductory sentences launch the episode, set in the middle of the night, by the flicker of a candle; the fearful event is heralded with Strap's return, with all the outward signs of terror. It is given a supernatural quality ("I have seen the devil"), confirmed by the ringing of bells—at this stage, the reader cannot guess that Roderick is referring to morris bells and not to the more solemn bells used in religious rituals, particularly funerals, and thus possibly endowed with sinister connotations, such as the bell which "invites" Macbeth to kill Duncan.⁷ Strap's panic affects Roderick and the scene is set for the terrifying apparition. Enter the raven. Of course, his size horribly exceeds the norm ("monstrous overgrown"), and as if guided by his own will, he heads straight to the bed, to attack Roderick and Strap, or so it seems. He is called "creature," "apparition" and "phantom," in a progression towards a greater degree of unreality which as a result tends to efface his animal nature and gives him a supernatural, more precisely devilish dimension which Roderick no longer questions ("I verily believed we were haunted"), partly because of his Scottish origins. The human-made bells the bird is associated with blur all the more Roderick's (and the reader's) perception of it; the raven is nevertheless not personified since the possessive used remains "its" and not "his" ("its feet," "its beak"). Although the apparition is said to be "terrible" and arouses Roderick's and Strap's "violent fright," several elements convey a different impression to the reader: Strap's jumping into bed with "his hair standing on end" and cowering behind Roderick, in a clichéd representation of terror; the reference to "pranks;" the strange behaviour of this supposedly fearful apparition, underlined by

⁷ "I go, and it is done; the bell invites me/ Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell/ That summons thee to heaven or to hell" (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* [1606], II, 1, 62-64).

the pleasant alliterative patterns (“several severe,” “beak through the blankets”); and the definitely un-Gothic quality of a scene in which a raven hops around while two grown men hide underneath the blankets, child-like, before “peep[ing] up.” The terrible and fearful are greatly qualified for the reader as this first episode clearly comes across as comical.⁸

But the atmosphere soon changes as a human apparition succeeds the bird’s. To a large extent, this episode repeats the first one, which contributes to the impression of unease, as though the old man were imitating the raven. The same terms (“creature,” “apparition”), phrases (“hopped away,” “tripped away”) or patterns recur in the two instances: “a raven entered our chamber...[and] made directly towards our bed” parallels “an old man enter[ed] ... the room... I ...saw him come streight up to me.” Like the bird, the old man possesses a hybrid dimension, both animal (“wild”) and inanimate (“a ghastly object”) but above all supernatural (“that did not savour of this world,” “a voice that did not seem to belong to a human being,” “accent still more preternatural”). But the effect produced on the characters and on the reader varies from the first apparition to the second. Strap seems to disappear, as if by magic, as the apparition comes “streight up to *me* [i.e. Roderick, emphasis added]” and the personal pronouns “I” and “me” abruptly replace “we” and “us”—Roderick’s sudden and inexplicable isolation emphasises the frightening character of this passage.⁹ Furthermore, hiding behind blankets becomes impossible since Roderick, “almost petrified with fear,” is incapable of making the slightest movement or uttering a single sound: “I was so amazed that I had not power to move my eyes from such a ghastly object, but lay motionless,” in the thralls of what Ann Radcliffe would later define as horror.¹⁰ The long white beard, revealing the man’s old age, contrasts with the coat he has “buttoned behind,” as a child might, while the repetition of his request “Where is Ralph,” with the diminutive form “Ralpho” which could sound somewhat childish, may be ridiculous but is far from comical and on the contrary, reinforces the disturbing impression created by the scene. This man, between childhood and old age, nature and the supernatural, seems utterly dependent on the raven whose behaviour he reproduces; the sound of the bells, which ushered in the raven, now signals the old man’s departure, imparting a cyclical dimension to the passage. This grotesque creature is fearful to Roderick and puzzlingly sinister for the reader who cannot assign him a clear and stable definition.

His disappearance is followed by two codas. First, Strap provides Roderick and the reader with an elaborate interpretation based on supernatural premises (the raven and the old man are both unearthly creatures), an interpretation which Roderick rejects—although in his terror, Strap enhanced the deformity of what was already distorted, magnifying the bird to horse-size and mistaking the ringing of bells for the

⁸ Cruikshank’s illustration of this scene in an 1831 edition of *Roderick Random* shows the night-capped heroes clinging to their bed-sheet in a neat little bedroom with checkered curtains, hardly a frightening sight.

⁹ Roderick’s faithful sidekick Strap is a largely comic character sometimes verging on the ridiculous; he makes Roderick’s hardships more bearable, either by actually helping him, or by adding a humorous touch. The novel is at its darkest when he is not by Roderick’s side, as on board the *Thunder* for instance.

¹⁰ Radcliffe famously differentiated between terror and horror, writing: “Terror and Horror are so far opposite that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them” (see Radcliffe 1826).

clanking of chains, Roderick correctly identified both the large raven and the morris bells. If Strap's fertile imagination may raise a smile, Roderick notes that "in all [his] future adventures, [he] never passed a night so ill," which retrospectively sounds surprising in a novel containing the terrible chapters on board the *Thunder*, in which Roderick falls dangerously ill or is tied up to a mast in the middle of a deadly battle at sea, or in jail, where the hero nearly becomes insane. This sentence, which stresses the psychological impact of those apparitions and specifically the impossibility of defining them precisely and coming up with a convincing explanation, arguably urges the reader to look beyond a merely comical interpretation of the passage as a whole and to consider it in a more disturbing, or at least in a less straightforward light. In the morning, a second interpretation (the second coda) is given by Joey, the driver of the coach in which Roderick and Strap journey to London. He bursts out laughing, as everything is ridiculous to him, both the episode in itself and Strap and Roderick's reactions. Then he explains away the whole mystery in a few short lines: the heroes met with what can now be firmly defined as an idiot and his tamed bird. No relief, no amusement (or shame) however is mentioned by Roderick, nothing is said of the impact of Joey's revelations on the heroes, while the interpolated clause "it seems" might even cast a slight doubt over this explanation. The unease created by this encounter with the grotesque does not appear to be entirely dissipated by the return to daylight, to order and definition. To conclude briefly on this excerpt and return to Ruskin's branches of the grotesque, we may say that the sportive mode predominates with the monstrous raven, while the old idiot's ridiculous traits do not prevent him from falling into the category of the terrible grotesque, which is partly due precisely to his link with the raven, to the fact that he imitates his bird—a repetitive, almost mechanical nature made clear by the two nearly identical sentences he pronounces ("repeated") and by the fact that he follows his raven and reproduces his behaviour, and not the other way round: he is called away by the ringing of a bell like a servant obeying his master's call.

Such is also the way in which *Barnaby* presents his own relationship with Grip in Dickens's novel. Grip is the master, and Barnaby the servant:

'Call him!' echoed Barnaby, sitting upright upon the floor, and staring vacantly at Gabriel, as he thrust his hair back from his face. 'But who can make him come! He calls me, and makes me go where he will. He goes on before, and I follow. He's the master, and I'm the man. Is that the truth, Grip?' (61)

"I'm the man" has two meanings: if the context (Grip is "the master") makes it clear that it is to be understood as "man servant,"¹¹ its first sense of "human being" cannot be rejected and Barnaby's insistence on his human condition becomes slightly disturbing, hinting as it does that his human identity needs to be reasserted because it is fundamentally unstable or ill-defined. The blurring of the limit between man and animal recurs several times in the novel, notably when Barnaby describes

¹¹ This idea is taken up a few lines further down, with phrases such as "the bird appeared disposed to come of himself" and "condescending to be held out at arm's length" (61).

Grip as his “brother” (473). Since Barnaby and Grip are important characters in a work comprising 700 pages or so, my purpose is not to study one particular passage but rather to distinguish a few recurrent traits in the depiction of each and of their relationship, which in fact relies more on complementarity than on domination.

Indeed, Grip apparently possesses the sense which Barnaby lacks (“The bird has all the wit” (61), explains the novel’s true hero, the locksmith Gabriel Varden), filling a gap left by what is explicitly presented by the narrative voice as the “absence of a soul” (35), a void confirmed by the repetition of the adjective “vacant” or the adverb “vacantly” to describe the young man throughout the novel (58, 61, 209, etc.). Barnaby is incomplete, not entirely a man, while Grip is more than a bird, a being whose very nature Varden seems to question: “The locksmith shook his head—perhaps in some doubt of the creature’s being really nothing but a bird” (62). Terms like “reflective” or “reflect” are repeatedly associated with the raven (e.g. “the raven was in a highly reflective state,” 216), which underlines Grip’s presumed thought process and at the same time reveals one aspect of his relationship with Barnaby as man and bird reflect each other in a mirror-image, again making the frontiers between man and animal porous. Gifted with language, Grip appears to understand what he is told and to answer accurately: ““Is that the truth, Grip?” The raven gave a short, comfortable, confidential kind of croak;—a most expressive croak, which seemed to say, ‘You needn’t let these fellows into our secrets. We understand each other. It’s all right’” (61). The expressive croak aptly answers Barnaby here and elsewhere. Grip might even be able to read, as when he takes a stroll in a cemetery, “appearing to read the tombstones with a very critical taste” (216). Grip calls forth an uncomfortable reaction from the angelically-named Gabriel Varden, who sees him as an evil creature and declares: ““If there’s any wickedness going on, that raven’s in it, I’ll be sworn’” (63). Gabriel’s impression, shared by several critics,¹² is caused by certain elements in the story and confirmed by some narrative techniques, which may cast a doubt on Grip’s real nature. For instance, like Smollett’s bird, Grip is oversized, “a large raven” (60). His hybrid character is frequently brought out when he is compared to a rooster, to a dog (because of the barking sound he makes) and most of all to a man, for instance: “[Grip] went to Barnaby—not in a hop, or walk, or run, but in a pace like that of a very particular gentleman with exceedingly tight boots on, trying to walk fast over loose pebbles,” (61) or “walking up and down when he had dined, with an air of elderly complacency which was strongly suggestive of his having his hands under his coat-tails” (216).¹³ Grip is regularly personified thanks to the pronoun “he” or the possessive “his” and the narrative voice endows him with human feelings or attributes, “critical taste,” “complacency” or condescension for instance in the passages quoted above.

¹² James K. Gottshall thus describes Grip as “a clear symbol of evil ironically loved by the innocent boy,” which “stands as a kind of externalized demon in possession of Barnaby” (Gottshall 1961, 141). Such an extreme interpretation, both of Grip as a “symbol of evil” and of Barnaby as an “innocent boy,” is convincingly challenged by other critics, as will be seen further down in the present article; a more nuanced view is put forward by John Bowen, who sees Grip as “one aspect of the ghostly and uncanny forces” which cannot be “easily exorcised” (Bowen 2003, xxvii).

¹³ Grip does not “hop,” as ravens do—and as Smollett’s does.

Most of all perhaps, as evoked previously, the preternaturally long-lived Grip¹⁴ presents himself as a fiendish creature, repeatedly asserting “I’m a devil,” usually three times in a row, incantation-like. He does so for instance when, most fittingly, he visits a cemetery: “Sometimes, after a long inspection of an epitaph, he would strop his beak upon the grave to which it referred, and cry in his hoarse tones, ‘I’m a devil, I’m a devil, I’m a devil!’” (216). Similarly, he seems to draw a “magic circle” (520) around Barnaby and his father in jail and is described as “look[ing] like the embodied spirit of evil” (212). Black, carrion-eating ravens with their “hoarse” cries (the adjective is repeated many times to describe Grip’s voice), have “long been regarded as creatures of mystery and ill omen, presagers of doom and death,” as Jerome H. Buckley puts it (Buckley 1992, 29); they also mediate the opposition between life and death, as Grip does when he enjoys his walk around the cemetery and urges his audience “Never say die” (61, 96, 152, 153, etc.). For anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 224), the crow, hovering between nature and the supernatural, the human and the inhuman, stands for a figure of the trickster, an a-moral creature which can be comical as well as sinister and is often considered as grotesque, by Geoffrey Harpham for instance (Harpham 1982, 53). This hybrid figure eludes ready definition and acts as a go-between, linking different worlds, notably the divine and the human, a role which mirrors Barnaby’s mediation as a messenger between the novel’s thwarted lovers as well as between its sworn enemies.

The effect this grotesque bird produces on Gabriel Varden is not altogether positive as the locksmith is “divided between admiration of the bird and a kind of fear of him” (60). Grip’s hybrid character and his strange relationship with Barnaby, as described above, might lead the reader to share Varden’s suspicion and conclude that the raven belongs to the terrible grotesque, a demonic creature leading Barnaby, who would be as it were his victim, into a nocturnal world; the fact that the pair appears mostly by night in the first part of the novel would confirm this, as well as the description of Barnaby’s soul as “benighted” (51). The raven’s fiendish nature as perceived by Varden would thus reflect on Barnaby, turning the two of them into representatives of the forces which elude the understanding and remain unfathomable to human beings, nocturnal, perhaps demonic forces which, like Grip, are here tamed. This reading of Barnaby and especially of Grip, based mostly on Varden’s reactions and propounded in particular by James Gottshall, comes very close to Wolfgang Kayser’s conception of the grotesque as “an attempt to invoke and submit the demonic aspects of the world” (Kayser 1981, 185). It might be argued however that the reader reacts differently to Grip from Varden and perceives the raven in an essentially comic light, as Gordon Spence points out (Spence 1986, 16). Indeed, Grip’s interventions often contribute to ease the tension in some highly emotionally-charged passages, as when Barnaby probes into the secret his mother desperately tries to conceal:

¹⁴ Described as “a mere infant for a raven, when Barnaby was grey,” he is presumed to have “very probably gone on talking to the present time” (688) in the very last sentence of a novel published in 1841 but set in 1780.

‘I have always seen you—I didn’t let you know it, but I have—on the evening of that day grow very sad. I have seen you cry when Grip and I were most glad; and look frightened with no reason; and I have touched your hand, and felt that it was cold—as it is now. Once, mother (on a birthday that was, also), Grip and I thought of this after we went upstairs to bed, and when it was midnight, striking one o’clock, we came down to your door to see if you were well. You were on your knees. I forget what it was you said. Grip, what was it we heard her say that night?’

‘I’m a devil’ rejoined the raven promptly. (150-1)

Grip’s catch-phrase “I’m a devil” here provides comic relief, and is elsewhere used or referred to comically by the narrative voice, who thus comments that the bird “asserted his brimstone birth and parentage with great distinctness” (61). Furthermore, the personification alluded to above operates through comparisons or modalised utterances such as “appeared,” “seemed,” or “looked like,” revealing that Grip’s recurrent characterization as a hybrid or ill-defined creature is ultimately to be interpreted as playful; this is confirmed by the definitely clear-cut definition he once receives as “a creature of mere brute instinct” (390). This definition, which dispels any shade of ambiguity, occurs in a passage where Grip and Barnaby, likewise clearly defined as an “idiot” on the same page, are confronted with a landed proprietor, a stupid, illiterate, and violent magistrate said to be a “man,” and even a “gentleman,” who will be responsible for the death sentence passed on Barnaby and appears as much more truly terrifying than either Barnaby or his raven.

Unlike the phrase “a creature of mere brute instinct” though, the definition given to Barnaby (“an idiot”) still retains a part of ambiguity as it refers to a hybrid character caught between two worlds, whose nature, that of an adult who will always remain a child, as his mother well knows,¹⁵ is uncertain. This appears plainly in the description he is given at his first entrance into the novel in a passage where, and it must be noted, Grip is *not* present:

As he stood, at that moment, half shrinking back and half bending forward, both his face and figure were full in the strong glare of the link, and as distinctly revealed as though it had been broad day. He was about three-and-twenty years old, and though rather spare, of a fair height and strong make. His hair, of which he had a great profusion, was red, and hanging in disorder about his face and shoulders, gave to his restless looks an expression quite unearthly—enhanced by the paleness of his complexion, and the glassy lustre of his large protruding eyes. Startling as his aspect was, the features were good, and there was something even plaintive in his wan and haggard aspect. But, the absence of the soul is far more terrible in a living man than in a dead one; and in this unfortunate being its noblest powers were wanting.

¹⁵ “...perhaps the comfort springs that he is ever a relying, loving child to me—never growing old or cold at heart, but needing my care and duty in his manly strength as in his cradle-time—help him, in his darkened walk through this sad world, or he is doomed, and my poor heart is broke” (154).

His dress was of green, clumsily trimmed here and there—apparently by his own hands—with gaudy lace; brightest where the cloth was most worn and soiled, and poorest where it was at the best. A pair of tawdry ruffles dangled at his wrists, while his throat was nearly bare. He had ornamented his hat with a cluster of peacock's feathers, but they were limp and broken, and now trailed negligently down his back. Girt to his side was the steel hilt of an old sword without blade or scabbard; and some parti-coloured ends of ribands and poor glass toys completed the ornamental portion of his attire. The fluttered and confused disposition of all the motley scraps that formed his dress, bespoke, in a scarcely less degree than his eager and unsettled manner, the disorder of his mind, and by a grotesque contrast set off and heightened the more impressive wildness of his face. (35)

Wolfgang Kayser considers madness as a paradigm of the grotesque, insisting on the estrangement from human nature which it represents while seeing it as belonging to what Ruskin would term the “terrible grotesque”: “it is as if an impersonal form or alien and inhuman spirit had entered the soul. The encounter with madness is one of the basic experiences of the grotesque which life forces upon us” (Kayser 1981, 186). As we saw, this was very much the effect produced by the old man in the excerpt from Smollett’s novel, while Barnaby’s description, explicitly evoking a “grotesque contrast,” is not comical and conveys first of all an idea of disorder (the word is repeated twice). Barnaby’s expression is “quite unearthly” while the “paleness of his complexion” evokes a ghost. The “wildness of his face,” reminiscent of the “wild peculiarity” of the old man’s “eyes and countenance” in *Roderick Random*, is heightened by the peacock’s feathers he uses as ornaments for his hat, thus displaying his ornithological kinship with Grip—his animal dimension, which does not require Grip’s presence to be effective, will be developed later on in the novel when Barnaby wanders off with dogs (and Grip) as his sole companions. No wonder then that Barnaby’s closest associate, Hugh, is an ostler nicknamed the “centaur,” who sleeps in a stable and is happiest when around horses and dogs. Barnaby’s outfit is made up of diverse elements curiously put together and “parti-coloured,” while “motley” conjures up the image of a fool or jester, to whose habit the term is traditionally applied—in this case, of a fool whose aspect may be ridiculous but whose demeanour is not amusing. Barnaby thus belongs to a type of grotesque partly ridiculous and slightly fearful; the young man’s position itself, “half shrinking back and half bending forward,” seems to obey two contradictory impulses while the reaction he arouses in Gabriel Varden is also ambiguous. Although Gabriel feels both pity and tenderness for Barnaby, a tenderness entirely absent from Smollett’s extract,¹⁶ he mistrusts him, speaking for instance as low as possible to avoid being overheard by him (58), and here the reader may well be led to share Gabriel’s mixed sentiments towards an idiot who bears physically the trace of the crime committed by his father, as though he were marked by evil. A young

¹⁶ This points to an essential difference between Dickens and Smollett, as Dickens perceived it at least when he seemed to regret that Smollett’s was “a way without tenderness” in a letter to Frank Stone (2 November 1854). He alludes here particularly to *Roderick Random* and *Peregrine Pickle*.

man fascinated by gold who abandons his mother to take part in the Gordon riots alongside very shady characters, Barnaby “is not only a victim of evil, but also a participator in it,” writes Gordon Spence (Spence 1986, 17) making him a far more elusive and thus destabilizing character than his raven. So while the traditionally ominous raven belongs to the sportive grotesque in both *Roderick Random* and *Barnaby Rudge*, at least as perceived by the reader, the balance is more complex when we consider the *human* grotesque figure of the idiot, where the fearful predominates in Smollett and a slight unease remains perceptible in Dickens, caused by Barnaby’s ambiguous character. “Unease” is however not quite the same thing as the fear or repulsion caused by evil, which in these two novels is the mark of clearly-defined, non-grotesque, supposedly reasonable “men” like Oakhum in *Roderick Random* or Dickens’s magistrate and sir John Chester, whereas “poor Barnaby” (43-44, 412, 417, 480, etc.), whatever his errors, does not cease to be the object of Varden’s compassion—and of his author’s.

References

- Beasley, Jerry. 1998. *Tobias Smollett, Novelist*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.
- Bowen, John. 2003. “Introduction” to *Barnaby Rudge*. xiii-xxxi. London: Penguin.
- Buckley, Jerome H. 1992. “‘Quoth the Raven’: The Role of Grip in *Barnaby Rudge*.” 27-35. *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 21.
- Dickens, Charles. (1841) 2003. *Barnaby Rudge*. With an introduction by John Bowen. London: Penguin.
- . 1969. *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume II, 1840-1*. Edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gottshall, James K. 1961. “Devils Abroad: The Unity and Significance of *Barnaby Rudge*.” 133-46. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16.
- Harpham, Geoffrey. 1982. *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hollington, Michael. 1984. *Dickens and the Grotesque*. Beckenham (Kent): Croom Helm.
- Kayser, Wolfgang. (1957) 1981. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Translated by Ulrich Weisstein. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. (1958) 1963. *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New-York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Notestein, Wallace. 1946. *The Scot in History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Radcliffe, Ann. 1826. “On the Supernatural in Poetry.” *New Monthly Magazine*. Vol. 16, n° 1.
- Ruskin, John. (1886) 2007. *Stones of Venice. Volume III: The Fall*. New York: Cosimo.
- Smollett, Tobias. (1748) 1999, 2008. *Roderick Random*. With an Introduction by Paul-Gabriel Boucé. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spence, Gordon. 1986. “Introduction” to *Barnaby Rudge*. 11-42. London: Penguin.

Wiestra, F. D. 1928. *Smollett and Dickens*. Amsterdam: De Bor.

Wittig, Kurt. 1958. *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd,